

Issue Characterization: GFNMS - Vessel Traffic

Problem Statement:

Recognizing that spills can potentially occur from any transiting vessel carrying crude oil, bunker fuel, or other hazardous material, GFNMS seeks to reevaluate the southern-most approach lane to San Francisco Bay and make a determination on whether a further correction needs to be made on the placement of approach lanes. Of particular concern are potential impacts from spills on marine mammals and sea birds in and around the Farallon Islands.

Issue Characterization:

The current pattern of vessel traffic transits established by the IMO through Cordell Bank, Gulf of the Farallones and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuaries relies on distances offshore, which are in part based on an analysis of the anticipated response time for existing rescue vessels. That is, if a vessel that follows the routing measures loses power or steering capabilities, it will almost certainly be reached by a rescue vessel before it drifts ashore and creates a spill. The calculations for "distances offshore" shifted the southern-most approach into San Francisco Bay vessel traffic lane closer to the Farallon Islands. The new vessel traffic lanes also shifted large commercial vessels away from nearshore waters to enhance the predictability of their locations and reduce collisions and interference with smaller fishing or recreational vessels. Again, this strategy placed the southern approach lanes into San Francisco Bay within closer proximity to the Farallon Islands, increasing the risk and exposure of sensitive Sanctuary resources to potential hazardous spills.

In May 2000, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) gave final approval to a shipping lane proposal developed through a two-year collaborative effort led by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the U.S. Coast Guard. In a series of meetings along the central California coast participants from local, state and federal government agencies, the shipping and oil industries, environmental groups and elected officials played key roles in crafting the final solution.

The newly adopted vessel traffic lanes place large vessels further offshore in north-south tracks ranging from 13 to 20 nautical miles from shore between Big Sur and the San Mateo coastline. Ships carrying hazardous materials would follow north-south tracks between 25 and 30 NM from shore. Tankers would remain at least 50 NM offshore. To facilitate the alignment of these offshore routes, the proposal also extends the vessel traffic separation lanes in the western end of the Santa Barbara Channel and rotates the southern-most approach into San Francisco Bay further offshore to reduce the risk of grounding (but closer to the Farallon Islands). Because the separation scheme is voluntary, not all ships comply with the recommendations.

As of 1998, approximately 6,000 commercial vessels (excluding domestic fishing craft) entered and exited the San Francisco Bay. Approximately half of these vessels transit south off the coast of California, while the other half transit north or west of San Francisco. Less than 25% of the vessels are tankers of intermediate size (draft <50 ft.) and about 5% are large vessels (draft >50 ft.). Other vessels that transit between San Francisco and Los Angeles include: container ships, bulk carriers, chemical carriers, military vessels, research vessels, cruise ships and tugs.

Historically, the total number of spills from transiting vessels is small, but the potential impacts may be enormous given the number and volume of vessels, and the hazardous cargo lane's proximity to the Farallon Islands and major seabird and marine mammal populations. Currently, the southern shipping lane approaches San Francisco Bay at a point approximately 3.5 miles from the Gulf of the Farallones. During the last year, approximately 2,000 commercial vessels were reported using the southern approach shipping lane. Large commercial vessels (LCVs) are of particular concern for spills since they can carry up to 1 million gallons of bunker fuel, a heavy, viscous fuel similar to crude oil, which they use for fuel.

Recognizing that spills can potentially occur from any transiting vessel carrying crude oil, bunker fuel, or other hazardous material, GFNMS seeks to reevaluate the southern-most approach to San Francisco Bay, and make a determination whether a further correction needs to be made on the placement of the approach lanes.

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Other Related Issues That Came Up During Scoping:

- Move tanker traffic further offshore, outside of Sanctuaries
- Safety should be considered in the westbound lane for ships, fishing vessels, and all water craft
- Evaluate the need to require tug escorts in other sensitive coastal areas
- Worried about transport of oil over Cordell Bank
- Commercial traffic that traverses the sanctuary should have to pay a fee that could be used to enhance the coastal ecosystem
- Need to add tug escorts especially at potato patch

How the Site is Currently Addressing the Issue:

- Oil tankers, barges and other cargo vessels prohibited within 2 nm of Farallon Islands, Bolinas Lagoon and ASBS
- Discharging or depositing any materials in the Sanctuary is prohibited